The Fourth Church Pulpit

AND GOD RESTED

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 2:23-28, Genesis 1:31-2:3

". . . on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested. . ."
Genesis 2:2 (NRSV)

Kathleen Norris is a writer who, with her poet husband, moved twenty years ago from Manhattan and the busy, frenetic pace of the literary life in New York to South Dakota, and has written a fine new book about it entitled *Dakota*. Her first and lasting impression is how much more you experience when you slow down. She interviewed a community of monks who live in a desolate monastery on the prairie:

> "You see things you can't see speeding down the interstate," they told her: "white-faced calves basking in the spring grass like lilies of the field. . . . January winds that make rivulets. . . . We see lots of little things. We are grateful."

It is amazing what you can see when you keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. It's an unusual experience for most of us, I think. It is for me, I confess. My job is to talk, to point things out, to make observations. Even though I practice a profession that, in theory at least, values silence, prayer, meditation and reflection, I practice it in an institution and a culture that puts a much higher premium on activity and productivity; doing, organizing, speaking, urging, cajoling, admonishing, talking.

So it was most unusual, and uncomfortable, to find myself one time in a situation purposely structured to force the issue. I was one of twenty participants in an Outward Bound Program designed for people like me. I was dropped off on the rocky shore of an island off the coast of Maine. I was not sure when someone was going ;ome back to get me. I had a pencil and pocket notebook and nothing else. As my companions left me standing there I was amused at first at the peculiarity of the situation and then, quickly, anxious. What would I do? What in the world would I do in this place for who knows how long? I didn't even have a watch.

Now to add a little clarity. I don't go anywhere without a briefcase, or at the very least something to read. I have learned from experience for instance, never to leave the waiting room in a doctor's office to go to the examination room without taking some reading material with me, or a legal pad. So standing on that rocky outcrop beside the Atlantic Ocean, absolutely alone, for who knows how long, was not a situation which was either familiar or comfortable. I looked around and walked around and checked out the rocks and a few shrubs and that about exhausted the possibilities of things to do. So I sat down, found a small indentation and a slab to lean against and, for an unusual few minutes, was quiet and still. And it wasn't long before I began to see things — the water rhythmically lapping the rocky beach, clouds moving across the sun. And then a little ritual I had never seen before and will never forget. A gull swooped down fifteen feet in front of me and with graceful efficiency, picked up a scallop shell and flew off. I followed his flight. He made a slow turn and passed overhead 30 or 40 feet above and dropped the shell onto the flat rock in front of me where it shattered. It took several repetitions for me to see the entire sequence. As soon as he released the shell he did a nearly acrobatic cartwheel in mid-air and almost as soon as the scallop shell hit the hard flat surface of the rock and broke open, there he was swooping in low to pick up the exposed scallop. In less than a minute he returned and did it all again. Timing was critical. There was another gull who, several times at the precise moment the shell hit the rock, flew in low over the surface from the other direction and plucked off the prize — to the consternation of my friend who had arrived after his cartwheel and power dive a moment too late. He complained when that happened, but made only a symbolic gesture of pursuit, instead stoically picked up another shell and started all ;er again. I had never seen anything like it and would never see it again for several reasons, chief among them the simple fact that being still and quiet for an extended period of time were the prime prerequisites.

Contrast that with something a little more familiar. Several weeks ago a national news magazine published a feature article on what international investment banking is like these days. As you know, high tech data processing provides instant access to information about securities activity as it happens everywhere in the world. Computers are programmed to monitor carefully for significant activity which suggests dealing. Investment bankers in London, Amsterdam, Frankfort, Tokyo, Sydney, Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, are watching the same information carefully. It is a never-ending day in which the market never closes. If you are in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles and if you or your system or your associates are not working, monitoring around the clock, you lose. It sounded to me like a contemporary version of Dante's Hell.

It's not your imagination. We are working harder and longer than anyone before us. As a consequence our days are faster and fuller. The sociologists who monitor our behavior confirm that the pace is accelerating. It is faster this year than it was last year and very significantly faster than it was a decade or two ago.

In his personal memoir, *Around the Cragged Hill,* George F. Kennan, one of our senior statesmen, observes:

> "When the effects of technological innovation are only (as seems to be mainly the case with the computer) to speed the manifold purposes of a life that is plainly already proceeding at a pace far too great for the health and comfort of those that live it . . . there my interest in it can be no more than casual. I see no betterment of the condition of human life or the quality of human beings." [p. 107]

So we live faster and harder, our technology allowing us to live and move and have being in never-ending daylight, in a marketplace that never closes. And here comes religion with a quaint and eccentric notion of Sabbath — a rest — a time of quiet, specific emptiness and silence. How odd. Harvey Cox said that one of the functions of religion is to be eccentric.

> "Religion is an antique settee on the freeway, an almost indecipherable old song disturbing the blips of the computers." [p. 327, *The Seduction of the Spirit*]

Nowhere are we more eccentric, more indecipherable, than here — with our notion of Sabbath.

It is at the heart of our world view. It is not at all peripheral. The first story in the Bible is a story of creation. "In the beginning . . . God . . ." an astonishing affirmation of faith. And then the gorgeous sweeping panoply of creation — a beautiful, sensual hymn, of order formed from chaos, of light and darkness, oceans and dry land, vegetation and wild beasts, fruit and fish and cattle, stars and sun and moon and finally, in God's image, men and women to enjoy the creation and each other and together to live in and be responsible for the project. Each day God looks and sees that it is good — lovely, delightful: on the sixth day God steps back and takes in the whole project and "indeed, it was very good. . . ."

And on the seventh day God finished the work, "and God rested on the seventh day . . . so God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it."

That marvelous creation sequence in Genesis 1, please remember, was not written to answer scientific curiosity about the origin of life. It is not science or history or anthropology. It is a creed, an affirmation of faith, and its purpose was to comfort and encourage and give hope to people who had about concluded that there was no future, no hope, essentially, no God. The people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. Their culture, customs, religion, their very existence was being overwhelmed and absorbed by the dominant ethos of Babylon. Genesis 1 is pastoral care, written for their encouragement, their survival.

"In the beginning . . . God," "It was good," "And God rested"; each of them an essential component of this narkable piece of life-giving, life-saving affirmation.

Walter Brueggemann observes that -

> "The original Sabbath, in the exile period, had special significance - an act that announced faith in God and rejection of all other gods, religions. The celebration of a day of rest was the announcement of trust in the God who is confident enough to rest. It was, then and now, an assertion that life does not depend on our feverish activity of self-securing, but that there can be a pause in which life is given to us simply as a gift." [*Interpretation,* p. 3] Brueggemann calls the Hebrew notion of a Sabbath "the coming of a new sanity."

Note that the story of creation is a story in seven sections or chapters: six days of work, a seventh day of rest — and in that rest, the work of creation activity is completed. It is a subtle but important difference. The day of rest is not necessitated by the exhaustion of work. It's not as if God becomes worn out from six days of hard work and then experiences "TGIF". . . "I'm outa here. . . ." The seventh day is part of the process. It is an essential part of the process. God's rest is not the rest of exhaustion but the rest of fulfillment, completion, satisfaction, enjoyment, delight. Creation is not complete until it is, in resting, enjoyed.

It is at the heart of the Judeo/Christian world view. And it is expressed in the Fourth Commandment:

> "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God". . . "A new sanity."

It is the nature of good ideas to inspire institutions to give them expression and structure. And it is the nature of institutions to become ends in themselves and to forget the original idea. And so it was the Sabbath observance in the centuries before Jesus had became an elaborate legalistic system which was a long way from the original intent.

The original idea was that every six days' work should give way to rest. In Jesus' day keeping the Sabbath had become an elaborate ritual. The law identified thirty-nine categories of forbidden work, each subdivided several times. One category of forbidden work was carrying burdens. But what is a burden? Is a child a burden? At what age does a child become a burden which it is forbidden to carry on the Sabbath? The law was clear that a child of any age, even an infant, with an object clutched in his hand, becomes — by reason of the unnecessary object — an illegal burden. [See William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today,* p. 27]

And so Jesus one time was caught picking grain to eat on the Sabbath. The law allowed travelers to help themselves. But not on the Sabbath. Technically Jesus and friends broke four different Sabbath laws: prohibiting reaping, winnowing, threshing and preparing a meal.

He answered his critics by referring to a precedent: David himself had broken a few of those laws. But more to the point, the Sabbath was made for the welfare of human beings . . . that's the point. The Sabbath is not an end in itself. And then he seemed to go out of his way to illustrate the point by healing a man with a withered hand in defiance of a very specific law against healing on Sabbath. The man's life was not in danger. He didn't even ask to be healed. Jesus saw him and healed him and eloquently demonstrated God's preference r goodness and compassion and mercy, which always transcends legalism and religious custom.

The Christian Church hasn't always remembered that. Early in our history the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week — the Lord's Day — was combined with the Hebrew notion of Sabbath. The marriage has produced some peculiar results. The Puritans could be obsessive about the Sabbath, at one point outlawing "vain and profane walking about" on the Sabbath. Scots Presbyterians were legendary for Sabitarianism. In 1842 the Presbytery of Glasgow was incensed at the initiation of train service to Edinburgh on Sunday and called it a "flagrant violation of the law of God, a grievous outrage." In Edinburgh a delegation of ministers lined the platform and "informed the passengers getting off the train that they had bought tickets to hell." [William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today,* p. 37, 38]

American Presbyterians were always identified with strict Sabbath observance. Robert Ingersoll was raised a Presbyterian and detested the denomination. He writes,

> "No church has done more to fill the world with gloom than the Presbyterian. Nothing ever was, nothing ever will be more disgusting than a Puritan Sunday." [See Benton Johnson, *Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance, The Presbyterian Predicament,* p. 91]

— a sentiment with which I would have agreed, prohibited myself as a youngster from doing much of anything interesting on Sunday after church other than sitting on the porch.

So the church has created as much silliness as the ancient law of Judaism and in the process quite missed the point which I believe is not only a good one, but as vital to our sanity, our health and well-being, our life, as it was to the survival of the exiled community.

Medical doctors now recognize something they call "chronic exhaustion syndrome" with common symptoms: lethargy, apathy, depression. Researchers are observing a new phenomenon. . .

> ". . . people in the United States (particularly) are not getting enough sleep and therefore struggle through their days with a 'sleep deficit.' True rest is becoming a rare and endangered phenomenon, pushed by our culture to the margins of life." [See John Mogabgab, *Weavings,* March/April, 1993, p. 2]

We're not only busy people, we make busyness into a symbol of importance, meaning and personal worth. "You're a busy person" translates into "you're an important person." "How are you?" We answer, "I'm busy," which when you think of it doesn't tell how you are at all. A book on getting ahead advises, only slightly with tongue in cheek: buy a date book and fill it up with fictitious engagements and appointments to look busy and successful. "Who would trust their face to a plastic surgeon with plenty of open space on his calendar?"

I have been chuckling about a conversation I found myself in recently, having a cup of coffee with three friends in an airport because our flight was delayed an hour. We started with the familiar laments and complaints about the inconvenience and hassle and how busy we all were and how the rest of the day, the week, maybe the whole month would be out of sync because of this one-hour hiatus. And then one of my friends, a very busy pastor of a big church outside Philadelphia said, "You know, actually, I'm not too unhappy. In fact, I rather like having this hour. I like delays in airports. I go to the boarding area, find a corner and read for an hour, uninterrupted. It's glorious." Sheepishly, we each admitted it . . . we rather liked having an hour in which we could not do very much and therefore were blessed with freedom to read, write, drink coffee, rest . . . a small sabbath. We each admitted that it is the secret advantage of traveling, even though it's normal to complain, small sabbaths in airports and on airplanes. We even admitted that having a mild cold can be a good thing because it gives us permission to go home and crawl in bed and read a magazine.

It's a spiritual thing with us. We work hard and long, not only because good work is demanding and energizing, which it is, but because we don't know how to stop which, according to Genesis 1, means we never nplete our work. A man who leads retreats to help people with it observes,

> "There is a terrific momentum — like a freight train driving us from rest. . . . We feel compelled to be productive, responsible. . . . Most of us," he goes on, "have an ambivalent relationship with the idea of rest. We feel guilty about doing 'nothing'. . . ." Worse yet, "When we are not being productive, . . . an anxious part of us starts to question our self-worth and feel that in our inactivity we are 'nothing.' Strip me of all my busyness and my achievement-directed actions and ask me to rest for a few minutes, and I begin to feel like I am making a terrible plunge into nothingness. I fear that I might disappear altogether!" [Ron Farr, *Weavings,* op. cit., p. 23, 24]

Observing the Sabbath says that God can manage the world without my work, at least for a while. It says that my identity, my value as a person does not depend on what I produce. Rather my value is given to me by the one who created me. And it is a very wise acknowledgement that I will be healthier and therefore more productive if I allow my work to be completed in rest: if I allow myself to feel fulfilled and completed and satisfied in the work I have been able to do. "A new sanity" Brueggemann calls it.

Kathleen Norris writes that being still — emptying your life intentionally of structure and activity — is a "radical way of knowing exactly who, what and where you are, in defiance of powerful forces in society — alcohol, drugs, television, shopping malls — that aim to make us forget." [p. 22, 23]

Jesus saw through the silly excess of religious custom to the important kernel of truth. God's plan is for uman beings to complete their work, their lives, in rest. It is part of the order of creation. It shaped his own spirit. He kept the Sabbath.

It is a gift . . . to be accepted and enjoyed.

"And God rested." From the very highest authority, you have permission to do the same. Amen.